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ABSTRACT

The purpose of these guidelines is to highlight proper and beneficial uses of College Board test scores and related data and to caution against uses that are inappropriate. The guidelines describe the College Board's responsibilities and those of users of the test scores. Other topics addressed include: use of test scores in counseling, recruiting of students, college admissions, placement and credit; and avoiding the misuse of test scores. The use of aggregate scores is also addressed to clarify the appropriate use of average scores and other aggregate score data and to describe the limitations of using average scores to compare the overall effectiveness of educational institutions. Names of members of the Council on Entrance Services are also provided. (KM)

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Guidelines on the Uses of College Board Test Scores and Related Data

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About These Guidelines

Educationally sound use of college entrance test scores, examination grades, and related information has long been important to the College Board, which shares the public's interest in the fair use of tests and concern for educational quality and standards.

Test scores can be very useful in helping admissions and placement staff as well as other educators better understand and interpret students' qualifications and preparation. Because of the variety of educational experiences available to students in more than 25,000 secondary schools throughout the country and the variety of grading practices, test results provide a uniform and objective measure of students' abilities or achievement in specific areas. Nonetheless, the College Board does not support the use of test scores as the sole basis for important decisions affecting the lives of individuals, when other information of equal or greater relevance and the resources for using such information are available.

All College Board tests are constructed to measure certain defined content and skills; appropriate use of scores from the different tests is closely related to the purpose and overall content of the test. In addition, all tests represent only a sample of an individual's abilities, knowledge, or skills. As such, test results can never be precise measurements.

Throughout these guidelines, users are reminded not to "overuse" test results, either by interpreting scores too broadly or too precisely. When used appropriately, test results can improve educational decisions and guide the academic preparation of individual students. The purpose of these guidelines is to highlight proper and beneficial uses of test scores and related data and to caution against uses that are inappropriate.

Because of the increasing public interest in educational accountability, aggregate test data are often widely publicized and analyzed. Most College Board tests are taken only by particular groups of self-selected students. Therefore, the aggregate results of their performance on these tests usually do not reflect the educational attainment of all students. A new section, Using Aggregate Scores, has been added to these guidelines to clarify the appropriate use of average scores and other aggregate score data and to describe the limitations of using average scores to compare the overall effectiveness of educational institutions.

This booklet has been developed by the College Board — through its member councils and panels — to offer guidelines on the appropriate uses of test scores.

It cautions users of test data about the limitations of testing and emphasizes the importance of using test results in conjunction with other information, such as a student's transcript and grades, in making admissions and related decisions.

The guidelines, however, are not a scientific blueprint for action applicable to every situation. For example, the College Board discourages the use of minimum test scores in making admissions or related decisions, unless such use can be appropriately validated on the basis of student performance within both the institution and specific program.

This booklet strongly encourages users to conduct validity studies in order to determine and review the best combinations of tests and other factors in making admissions decisions.

Participating in the preparation of this edition of the guidelines were the Board's councils on Access Services, Entrance Services, and College-Level Services; the CSS Council; and the Board's Advisory Panel on Student Concerns. The Council on Entrance Services, named on pages 14 and 15, had primary responsibility for the guidelines. Many of the changes incorporated in this edition resulted from deliberations of the *ad hoc* advisory committee listed below.

Joseph J. Biscoglio, Bronxville High School, New York

Kathryn M. Forte, University of Southern California, California

Larry E. Matthews, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, Arkansas

Fernando A. Yarrito, St. Mary's University, Texas

Guidelines on the Uses of College Board Test Scores and Related Data

These guidelines are addressed to all who use College Board tests and related data or who are otherwise interested in their proper use, particularly for selection purposes. They describe how the College Board, as sponsor of test services, interprets its own responsibilities in relation to the public and its clientele of users and what responsibilities it believes the users of these services have. The guidelines state the conditions the Board regards as appropriate for the use of its tests. They also call attention to certain practices that are considered as inappropriate or that limit equitable access to higher education for all groups of students, and they set forth the procedure to follow in questioning the use of test scores and related data.

1. The College Board should:

1.1 Adhere to the highest standards in the development and administration of its tests and related services, giving careful attention to such generally accepted standards as those embodied in *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1985), promulgated by the American Psychological Association in association with the American Educational Research Association and the National Council for Measurement in Education.

1.2 Provide those who use its testing services — counselors, admissions officers, school and college faculty members and administrators, and test-takers themselves — with full information about the purposes and nature of the services.

1.3 Advise educational institutions, agencies, and the public of the purposes, appropriate uses, and limitations of its tests and related services and, correspondingly, of the responsibilities they should exercise when they use such services.

1.4 Assure appropriate use of its tests and related services by maintaining test instruments that are current and relevant to the domains they measure, publishing information essential to understanding and using the services properly, providing research services to demonstrate the validity of admissions criteria, communicating and consulting on a regular basis with institutions and agencies that use the services, and seeking out instances of misuse and providing advice and assistance to the users in question.

1.5 Assure the appropriateness and fairness of its tests by engaging diverse faculty members, from both secondary and postsecondary levels as appropriate, in the construction and review of the tests.

1.6 Achieve fairness and demonstrate sensitivity to minorities, women, students with disabilities, and other groups of the test-taking population through special reviews of test questions.

1.7 Maintain for each of its testing programs procedures for seeking advice and criticism from students, as well as institutions, about the quality and adequacy of the services provided.

1.8 Maintain effective procedures for protecting the privacy of individual test-takers, releasing information that serves to identify them only with their consent.

1.9 Respect the interests of educational institutions and other organizations, releasing identifiable summary or aggregated data about them only to people explicitly authorized to receive such information.

1.10 Maintain effective procedures for verifying the scores of test-takers who question the accuracy of their scores and for responding with care to students' queries or concerns about particular test questions or test administration procedures.

2. Schools, colleges, universities, scholarship agencies, and other organizations that use College Board test scores and related information should:

2.1 Assign responsibilities involving test use to people knowledgeable about educational measurement, including the purposes, content, statistical characteristics, capabilities, and limitations of any test in use or under consideration.

2.2 Provide those who may have occasion to take tests with full information about them, including why they are required, when they are offered, and how the information they yield will be used.

2.3 Protect the privacy of test-takers by treating confidentially, in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the scores and other information derived from tests they take.

2.4 Use College Board test scores and related data with discretion and only for purposes that are appropriate and in ways that have been validated.

3. When College Board tests are used for counseling purposes, counselors should:

3.1 Advise students on what tests they may need to take in pursuing their educational objectives; when and where they might conveniently take the tests in view of institutional requirements, testing schedules, and their own personal schedules; and how to interpret their scores in the context of their own situations.

3.2 Explain the limitations as well as the capabilities of tests: that tests, like all measuring devices, are not perfectly precise and should not be treated as though they are; that admissions test scores are useful as one means of predicting academic performance in college when considered with other relevant information.

3.3 Inform students that admissions test scores are intended to be used by colleges and universities as supplementary to secondary school records and other relevant information, with the scores providing a useful uniform measure for all students in contrast to school records, which vary widely because of different grading practices.

3.4 Release the scores and other information derived from a test a student takes only with the student's explicit consent, if the student could be identified from the released information.

3.5 Encourage all potential college-bound students to take appropriate admissions tests, without regard to the possibility of raising or lowering the school or district average.

4. When College Board tests and related data are used for recruiting purposes, as in the case of the Student Search Service, the responsible officials should:

4.1 Seek to recruit only those students they are capable of serving well, and not mislead prospective students whose academic profiles clearly do not meet the standard selection criteria of the institution.

4.2 Identify the source of the information (for example, the College Board's Student Search Service) at the time they first communicate with prospective applicants.

4.3 Use the information only for their own recruiting purposes, consistent with assurances given to students by the College Board.

4.4 Provide prospective applicants with relevant information about the institution, including its environment and programs; the opportunities it provides for financial assistance and for placement and/or credit-by-examination; and the qualifications required for special academic programs.

4.5 Provide prospective applicants with relevant and helpful information about the characteristics of enrolled students (including those in special admissions categories) and recent graduates.

4.6 Publicize admissions requirements, procedures, and deadlines as they relate to College Board services and ensure that such materials are readily available to prospective applicants.

5. When College Board tests are used for admissions purposes, the responsible officials and selection committee members should:

5.1 Know enough about tests and test data to ensure that their proper uses and limitations are understood and applied.

5.2 Use test scores and related data from the College Board's Admissions Testing Program in conjunction with other indicators, such as the secondary school record, in predicting the applicant's chances for success at a particular institution.

5.3 Take into appropriate consideration predictions of performance for applicant subgroups — men and women, ethnic groups, international students, adults, and those interested in different academic programs — in developing equitable admissions policies and practices.

5.4 Guard against using minimum test scores unless used in conjunction with secondary school performance and unless properly validated.

5.5 Ensure that small differences in test scores are not the basis for rejecting an otherwise qualified applicant.

5.6 Refrain from offering admission to prospective students solely on the basis of test scores before they have applied.

5.7 Validate data used in the selection process regularly (generally at least every three years) to ensure their continuing relevance, using, if desired, the College Board's Validity Study Service.

5.8 View admissions test scores as contemporary and approximate indicators rather than as fixed and exact measures of a student's readiness for college-level work.

5.9 Maintain adequate procedures for protecting the confidentiality of test scores and other admissions data.

5.10 When introducing or revising admissions policies, allow sufficient lead time and provide adequate notice to schools and students, so that they can take the new policies into account when planning school programs and curricular offerings.

6. When systems or groups of colleges use College Board tests for admission purposes, the officials responsible for the group or system should:

6.1 Adhere to the guidelines for the use of tests for admissions purposes outlined in Section 5.

6.2 Validate data used in the selection process for the individual institution, and conduct appropriate system or group studies regularly (generally at least every three years) to ensure their continuing relevance.

6.3 Before determining the admissions policies to be adopted for the group or system of colleges, allow sufficient time and opportunity for representatives of the individual institutions to consider and discuss possible policies and to suggest alternative policies, especially as these relate to their institutions.

7. When College Board tests are used for placement and credit purposes, the responsible officials should:

7.1 Determine the appropriateness of particular tests through consultation with faculty members familiar with the content of the tests.

7.2 Establish standards appropriate to the performance levels and ranges of their enrolled students.

7.3 Accept the transfer of credits earned by examination at a previous institution when scores and test content meet their own standards.

7.4 Publicize their placement and credit policies, making clear which tests are used, how students gain access to them, what scores are required, how much credit may be awarded for each examination, whether or not credits granted meet degree requirements, and how much total credit may be obtained.

7.5 Identify as such the credits granted by examination on students' records and transcripts.

7.6 Establish fees, if any, for credits awarded by examinations that represent actual costs involved in providing this avenue to credit rather than instructional costs or other unrelated costs.

Avoiding the Misuse of Test Scores

Adhering to the foregoing guidelines will help ensure that test scores and related data are used appropriately from an ethical and educational standpoint. Because the decisions and judgments influenced by test scores may have significant personal and social consequences, care should be exercised to avoid practices that might limit educational opportunities for all students. When the guidelines outlined in the previous sections are properly followed, the result of using test scores should be decisions that are better in significant respects than they would have been without the influence of the scores.

The Council on Entrance Services of the College Board has found that, although a few specific uses of tests meet with either universal approval or disapproval, most uses can be counted on to provoke at least some debate about their merits or flaws. The disagreements sometimes turn on differences in the specific circumstances that may accompany a particular practice. Judgments about the use of test scores to screen applicants, for example, may be influenced by such considerations as how valid the tests are as predictors, how feasible it is to use other information instead of or in addition to the scores, and how many applicants can be accepted by the college or university. The technical issues raised, however, are ultimately likely to be of less significance than are questions of public policy and institutional prerogatives.

The Council has concluded that the most helpful advice it can offer users who wish to avoid inequitable or otherwise injurious practices related to test use is to consider the consequences of any test on those tested and to guard against using tests for purposes they are neither intended to serve nor capable of serving. The following are examples of test uses that should be avoided:

1. Using the SAT or other College Board tests as measures of the overall performance of students, teachers, educational institutions, districts, states, and other groups.
2. Encouraging the belief that the SAT or other College Board tests measure a person's worth as a human being.
3. Using test scores as the sole basis for important decisions affecting the lives of individuals, when other information of equal or greater relevance and the resources for using such information are available.
4. Using minimum test scores without proper validation on the basis of students' performance within the institution, and, if appropriate, by specific programs or by student subgroups.
5. Making decisions about otherwise qualified students based only on small differences in test scores.
6. Using SAT or other scores without appropriate consideration of their validity.
7. Providing inadequate or misleading information about the importance of test scores in making judgments or decisions.
8. Requiring or recommending that certain tests be taken, when in reality the scores are not used or are used to a negligible extent.
9. Failing to recognize differences in admissions standards and requirements that may exist among different schools or departments within many institutions when providing information to prospective applicants.
10. Discouraging certain students from taking the SAT or other tests in an effort to increase a school's or district's average score.

Using Aggregate Scores

As measures of developed verbal and mathematical abilities important for success in college, SAT scores are useful in making decisions about individual students and in assessing the academic preparation of individual students. Using these scores in aggregate form as a single measure to rank or rate teachers, educational institutions, districts, or states is invalid because it does not include all students. And in being incomplete, this use is inherently unfair.

For example, in order for one to make useful comparisons between states, of students' performance, a common test given to all students would be required. Because the percentage of SAT-takers varies widely among the states, and because the test-takers are self-selected, the SAT is inappropriate for this purpose.

The most significant factor in interpreting SAT scores is the proportion of eligible students taking the exam — the participation rate. In general, the higher the percentage of students taking the test, the lower will be the average scores.

In some states, for example, a very small percentage of the college-bound seniors take the SAT. Typically, these students have strong academic backgrounds and are applicants to the nation's most selective colleges and scholarship programs. Therefore, it is to be expected that the SAT verbal and mathematical averages reported for these states will be higher than is the national average. In states where a greater proportion of students with a wide range of academic backgrounds take the SAT, and where most colleges in the state require the test for admission, the scores are closer to the national average.

In looking at average SAT scores, the user must understand the context in which the particular test scores were earned. Other factors variously related to performance on the SAT include academic courses studied in high school, family background, and education of parents. These factors and others of a less tangible nature could very well have a significant influence on average scores.

This is not to say, however, that scores cannot be used properly as one indicator of educational quality. Average scores analyzed from a number of years can reveal trends in the academic preparation of students who take the test and can provide individual states and schools with a means of self-evaluation and self-comparison.

By studying other indicators — such as retention/attrition rates, graduation rates, the number of courses taken in academic subjects, or scores on other standardized tests — one can evaluate the general direction in which education in a particular jurisdiction is headed. A careful examination of other conditions impinging on the educational enterprise, such as pupil/teacher ratios, teacher credentials, expenditures per student, and minority enrollment, is also important.

Summaries of scores and other information by state, college, or school district can be used in curriculum development, faculty staffing, student recruitment, financial aid assessment, planning for physical facilities, and student services such as guidance and placement. Aggregate data can also be useful to state, regional, and national education policymakers, especially in tracking changes during a period of time.

Council on Entrance Services

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Writing to the College Board

Comments, complaints, inquiries, and suggestions about the use of College Board test scores and related information are welcome and should be addressed to the appropriate College Board Regional Office listed below.

College Board Offices

Middle States Regional Office
Suite 410, 3440 Market Street
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Midwestern Regional Office
Suite 401, 1800 Sherman Avenue
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